

UNIVERSITY OF ULSTER

REPORT OF A MEETING OF THE REVALIDATION PANEL: SUBJECT UNIT 31D PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

5 December 2018

PANEL:

Professor R Fee, Associate Dean (Education), Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, Ulster University (Chair)

Mrs M Nicell, School of Computing, Engineering and Intelligent Systems, Ulster University

Mr C Keenan, Students' Union, VP Academic and Affairs, Jordanstown campus, Ulster University

Dr A Felce, Standards and Frameworks Officer, Universities, Quality Enhancement and Standards, Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

Mr C Moss, Director of Education and Employer Partnerships, Sheffield Hallam University

Dr L Collins, Head of Organisational Development and Learning, Kainos Group, Belfast

REVALIDATION UNIT CO-ORDINATOR:

Mrs D Sloan, Centre for Flexible Education, Ulster University

IN ATTENDANCE

Mr B McArthur, Academic Office, Ulster University

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Panel met to consider the following programme within revalidation unit 31D Professional Practice.

Postgraduate Certificate in Professional Practice (PT) (BT, CE, JN, ME)
(*Proposed new title, 'Graduate Leadership'*)

1.2 The programme builds upon a previous Postgraduate Certificate in Professional Practice that had been introduced in 2014. A new programme title, 'Graduate Leadership', was proposed for consideration by the panel (see paragraphs 4.10 and 5.2 below). The programme was aimed at recent graduates (within the last three years) and was available as part of Ulster's 'Graduate Leadership Programme' (formally known as the 'Professional Experience Programme') which included a six-month industry internship, or as a stand-alone qualification accessible directly by graduates already in employment who wished to develop their professional leadership skills.

1.3 The programme was proposed for approval to offer it on each of the University's four campuses although it would be delivered primarily on the Belfast and Jordanstown campuses until 2020/21 and then, only at Belfast. Demand would determine whether it would thereafter be offered on the Coleraine and/or Magee campuses.

1.4 The programme would be offered in part-time mode only. It comprises three compulsory modules, two 15-credit point and one 30-credit point module, and would be completed within an academic year. The three modules are *new* modules (but see paragraph 4.11 below) which reflects the programme ethos whereby the curriculum was subject to annual review and revision, where appropriate.

1.5 The Panel met initially with two current students and two recent graduates and then with Professor B Murphy, Director of Access Digital and Distributed Learning, Mrs A Scanlon, Head of the Centre for Flexible Education, Mrs D Sloan, Revalidation Unit Co-ordinator and the course team.

2 DOCUMENTATION

The Panel received the following documentation:

- Agenda and programme of the meeting
- Guidelines for revalidation panels
- Preliminary comments provided by panel members
- External examiners' reports for the last two years
- Revalidation documentation

The following report is a summary of responses to panel questions provided by each of the groups that the panel met with during the event.

3 MEETING WITH STUDENTS

3.1 During the meeting with students and recent graduates of the programme, a wide-ranging discussion took place covering the following areas:

- support for students during internships
- feedback provided by staff
- staff accessibility
- role of class representatives
- preparedness of employers to receive students
- training plan in the workplace
- academic tutor visits to the workplace
- technical and workplace skills learned in the workplace
- schedule of work during monthly campus visits (while on placement)

3.2 The students were extremely positive regarding all aspects discussed. In response to a query regarding their exposure to 'internationalisation', all agreed that their primary focus was, or had been, on completing the programme successfully, that they considered the international perspective as an issue for the future.

4 MEETING WITH SENIOR MANAGEMENT AND COURSE TEAM

Introduction

4.1 Employer demand had led to the establishment, through cross-faculty collaboration, of the previous Postgraduate Certificate programme. It had been introduced in academic year 2014/15 and linked to the Professional Experience (internship) Programme (PEP). PEP was now to be renamed the 'Graduate Leadership Programme' to align with the proposed new title of the academic programme, 'Graduate Leadership'. The modules sit outside the normal faculty structures and the academic programme was resourced through the Centre for Flexible Education and supported by widening access and employers. Funding for the internship programme was currently in place until the end of academic year 2020/21. Over recent years, employer contribution to the £6000 student bursary had increased and now stood at £5000 with the University making up the shortfall. Initially funding had provided for 20 places and that had now risen to a maximum of 35 places that included five places funded via widening access budgets. The cap on the internship places did not apply to the academic programme. Regarding the academic programme, the intention was to explore new markets beyond the local internship programme. Moreover, the modules within the programme could be taken as standalone short courses within the University's flexible learning framework.

Internship programme

4.2 The number of applications to each internship opportunity could vary between 5 and 50 per year but the average lay between 5 and 10. In recent years, there had been no appreciable decline in numbers. Some placement opportunities were more popular than others. The recruitment process for the internships was as follows. Employers would apply to participate in the PEP programme. They would present a job specification that would be evaluated as to its suitability. Students would then apply for the post through the employer's own recruitment process. University staff would oversee the whole process. While the University had no control over the recruitment programme, students would be supported at the point of entry in areas such as CV development and interview techniques and staff would endeavour to match candidates to appropriate placements. No students would be discriminated against. The internships would be promoted to students as high quality opportunities and each would have the same opportunity.

4.3 The benefits of the internship programme were obvious. Whilst there was no formal data collection, anecdotally staff were able to note improvement in students' skill sets and confidence by the end of the programme. Completion of the internship alongside the academic programme therefore provided clear benefits for students. In some instances, graduates of the programme were now employers offering internship places. No database had been established for recording graduate success in terms of the achievement of graduate level employment and remuneration.

4.4 It was suggested that the student bursary of £6000 represented a salary across the six months of the internship at less than the legal minimum wage. It was pointed out that in this context, the internship provider was an 'employing organisation' as opposed to an 'employer' and was therefore not bound by the minimum wage requirement. In addition, there were other benefits. For example, students would avoid payment of the £2000 fee. All the conditions and requirements of the academic and internship programmes were made clear to students at the outset.

4.5 To prepare for internships, employers would be provided with an 'employer pack' to help them understand the ethos and purpose of the academic programme and the internship. The 'pack' would contain information ranging from basic information about timetabling and bursaries, the employers role and responsibilities, to information about the programme itself, for example, regarding modules and the assessment strategy. The 'pack' would include a letter outlining how the academic programme would work in conjunction with the internship. In addition, in advance of the internship, employers would be visited by academic staff to explain what was expected of them and to answer any queries they might have. Students on placement would be visited within the first six weeks by academic staff. Many employers were well established in providing internships and were thus cognisant with what was needed and already had processes in place to support students through the internship.

4.6 Some employers could be new 'start up' companies. Often however, in this circumstance, the new employer was someone previously employed in an established organisation that provided internships and was thus familiar with the programme. While the team supported students through the process, they did not dictate or seek to influence placement selection other than to ensure that a placement was 'fit for purpose'. The level of support provided by the team depended on the individual student. Initiative, one of the skills gaps identified by employers, was encouraged. For example, students were encouraged to take the lead and arrange to meet with the employer in advance to discuss their aims and objectives and the role that they would undertake during the internship. This would display two of the prominent skills that employers are looking for, initiative and confidence.

4.7 An internship was required to provide a graduate level experience. Consequently, the job specification would be scrutinised to ensure that this was the case. Where the role that a student was asked to perform was different to that advertised, or where in practice, the activities were not at a professional level, there would be discussions with the employer in an effort to re-craft the role to one at the required level. Throughout, the student would be provided with extra support. Where a student lost their position, for example, through a business folding (although this had never happened), using the team's own contact network, a new equivalent provider would be found.

4.8 During the internship, students would attend the University campus on one day per month. This was to ensure regular contact with the University, the course team and their peers. During workshops, there would be a range of activities to encourage student interaction and engagement with each other. Attendance at workshops would be monitored using attendance sheets and participation in learning activities would be tracked via course reports in the VLE, Blackboard Learn. Blackboard Learn would contain a course support area that housed general information and learning materials as well as discussion forums. It was in the module areas that most cohort building normally occurred. Between workshops, students would be able to communicate with staff at any time using email or telephone. Module information would be released weekly on the VLE requiring students to engage on online activity each week. Normally communication outside the programme involving peer-to-peer support would take place.

Revalidation process

Employer input

4.9 In preparing for revalidation, soundings were taken from an employer focus group regarding industry needs. Employers identified a range of current skills gaps such as organisational, professional, communication and interpersonal skills. The importance of digital skills as an enabler

for future employment opportunities across a range of sectors was another highlighted area although not the most prominent. Problem solving and initiative featured prominently. Also highlighted was the importance of ensuring graduates had access to continuing professional development and the availability of progression degrees to enable the continuation of skills development.

Programme title

4.10 The change of title to 'Graduate Leadership' resulted from feedback from students, employers and focus groups that included alumni of the programme. An offer of assistance by the external examiner for the programme had also been taken up. She had provided the team with her thoughts and advice throughout the process and had expressed satisfaction with the outcome. In addition to the consultations that had taken place in preparation for revalidation, feedback was routinely sought through annual surveys. Moreover, informal consultations were ongoing throughout the programme's period of approval. The question of the programme title had been discussed at length. Employers were keen that leadership should be to the fore since 'leadership' existed at various levels of organisations as well as amongst peers and within the wider environment. The name change would make explicit the focus of the programme making it more marketable and attractive to potential students.

Modules

4.11 While the modules were described as 'new' in the revalidation documentation, they were based on existing modules within the current programme. Adjustments had been made to their credit value, assessments and titles. Modules were reviewed annually taking account of feedback and, where considered appropriate, small changes were made on an ongoing basis. The underlying theme and focus of the module remained constant enabling students to return to the programme where they were unable to complete in one academic year.

Formative feedback

4.12 To improve formative feedback in *Managing Quality for Competitive Advantage*, a second assessment had been introduced mid-way through the semester. This played a formative role in preparing students for the final assessment at the end of the semester. In *Demonstrating Your Professional Identity*, a 'SWOT' analysis would be introduced at week 4 followed by a personal appraisal in week 7. These would create feedback opportunities for students at strategic points during the module that would feed into the final summative assessments at the end of the semester. In the final module, *Leading a Strategic Initiative*, students would participate in two interactive workshops during the semester that would allow them to review and receive feedback on their progress in achieving the primary assessment of developing and leading a strategic initiative.

4.13 The revalidation document identified 'problem-solving' as the top skill required by employers. This was implicit in each of the programme modules. The overall assessment strategy was based on the 'real world' and real company data would be used. Problem solving skills underpinned the strategy. Students would be required to identify problems, collaborate with others, and formulate and implement a solution. For example, in *Leading a Strategic Initiative*, students would be looking at failures within an organisation, identifying the causes and proposing solutions. To that extent, the whole module was based around problem solving. In arriving at a solution, a

student would be required to research various aspects and processes of the organisation in the context of its strategic aims and reinforcement of its competitive edge.

Internationalisation

4.14 Internationalisation would be encouraged throughout the programme through development of student understanding of values and behaviours that demonstrate cultural awareness and development of confidence. This would support their ability to work in a range of intercultural contexts. The international dimension was present across the programme, for example, in looking at supply chains. Furthermore, depending on the type of organisation, a student may be exposed to the international dimension during their internship.

4.15 In response to a suggestion that the programme level learning outcomes were not written level 7, the team responded that they were broken down into the four 'KIPT' components including 'Knowledge and Understanding'. This component, whose learning outcome statements each commenced using the verb 'understand', captured the facts, concepts and approaches that students would need to know about a new subject area. These could be complex concepts at Master's level. The Graduate Leadership programme would provide this complexity within each of the learning outcome statements in the 'Knowledge and Understanding' theme. It was suggested that it was appropriate for broad learning outcomes at any level to include 'understanding' (under 'Knowledge and Understanding') as these outcomes captured the foundational knowledge base of a subject that students would need before being able to build on and apply this knowledge. The subsequent themes intellectual, practical and transferable outcomes would then demonstrate how students would then apply or reflect on this information.

Attrition

4.16 Attrition was not a problem within the programme. This was primarily due to the open communication that existed between staff and students and the fact that all students were mature graduates who were highly motivated. Where it did occur, this was usually because a student had secured a permanent job and chose not to complete the programme.

Staff: support and professional development

4.17 The teaching staff met regularly both formally, through course committee meetings, and informally. Many team meetings had taken place during preparation for revalidation. The Centre for Higher Education Research and Practice (CHERP) supported the team in their professional development and the University had recently recognised the professionalism of the team by the award of its 'Distinguished Education Award for Collaborative Excellence'. Each member of the team was a member of the Higher Education Academy. A new MEd Higher Education Practice, starting in January 2019, which would be underpinned by enquiry-based learning, would open an additional route for professional development.

5 CONCLUSIONS

5.1 The Panel commended the Subject Team on the following:

- Quality of the revalidation document

- Extent to which the programme has been designed and constantly reviewed and enhanced to ensure its continued relevance to the needs of students, employers and the wider community, with a clear focus on students securing and maintaining employment at the right level
- Recognition of the course team through receipt of the Ulster University 'Distinguished Education Award for Collaborative Excellence'
- Development of a prescribed PgCert that can be adapted to employer and graduate needs, including those of the SME sector
- Flexibility within the programme for immediate postgraduate need and for lifelong learning and professional development
- Reference and context aligned to national and regional priorities.
- Use of work-based learning and innovative approach to assessment.
- Cross-disciplinary focus, team commitment and input from the employability team
- High level of pastoral and individual support provided to students

5.2 The panel approved the change of programme title to 'Graduate Leadership'.

5.3 The Panel agreed to recommend to the Academic Standards and Quality Enhancement Committee that the provision within Revalidation Unit 31D Professional Practice (now titled, 'Graduate Leadership') be approved for a period of five years (intakes 2019/20 – 2023/24 inclusive) subject to the conditions and recommendations of the Panel being addressed and a satisfactory response and a revised submission being forwarded to the Academic Office by 18 January 2019 for approval by the panel Chair.

Conditions

- 1) Address all issues detailed in the appendix to the panel report.
- 2) Revise the programme level outcomes to ensure that they reflect level 7 outcomes (see Appendices 4 and 5 of the Programme Approval, Management and Review Handbook).

Strong Recommendation

- 1) Establish a formal process to capture student destination, remuneration and success.

Recommendations

- 1) Make more explicit where problem-solving skills are addressed within the modules.
- 2) Consider formally mapping the modules for APCL purposes against established Ulster Master's degree programmes.

6 APPRECIATION

6.1 The Chair thanked the Panel members and in particular, the external members, for their valuable contribution to the revalidation process.

